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TRENDS IN BRITISH PARTY POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

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This paper addresses the question of why parties decline in electoral support and examines particularly the recent dealignment in Great Britain. The general theme is that dealignment depends on the nature of the demands placed upon the parties by the electorate and the response of the parties to those demands. An analysis of the key issues of the sixties and seventies shows that there were changes in the agenda of British politics, particularly in the form of increasingly salient economic problems and the emergence of several cross-cutting issues like immigration and devolution. It is argued that to some extent the intrinsic complexity of these issues and the demands they placed upon the parties should be blamed for the dealignment of support from the major parties during this period. At the same time, there is evidence that the response of the parties to these problems also contributed to their current predicament both in the sense that self-interested vote maximization led to voter alienation and that the institutionalization of support made adaptation and change more difficult.

TRENDS IN BRITISH PARTY POLITICS

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The extent to which support for the Conservative and Labour parties had declined by 1974 surprised many social scientists. In retrospect, the failure to appreciate this dealignment earlier was not caused by an absence of evidence in the sixties (Crewe, 1976). Rather, the reason it went unnoticed may have been that social scientists were not prepared to find electoral volatility in Great Britain, partly because textbooks have long emphasized the stability of the British party system, but also because the prevailing theories of electoral behavior tend to be more concerned with how parties acquire and maintain supporters than with how they lose them. While it might have been reasonable a few years ago to expect the post-war party configuration to continue indefinitely, events in the seventies have demonstrated that insofar as there is a trend in twentieth century British politics, it is one of intermittent surge and decline. The crucial question is of course why.

Since the growth or consolidation of political parties tends to receive more than its share of scholarly attention, the focus of this paper will be on the causes of electoral decline. The emphasis will be on recent developments in Great Britain, but the points I shall make derive from a broader theoretical framework which hopefully is relevant to other episodes of electoral volatility in British history. If so, then it should be possible to draw meaningful comparisons between the current dealignment and changes in the British party system at the turn of the century.

The central argument will be that partisan dealignment can be explained by understanding the nature of the demands placed upon the parties by the electorate and the way in which the parties responded to those demands. Most electoral studies emphasize the former on the assumption that when the electorate changes in some consequential manner, the party system must also change. Yet, whether shifts in the electorate alter the party system in some significant way depends on the parties' response. To take one example, if, as it is sometimes alleged, the enfranchisement of the working class shifted the distribution of attitudes in the British public to the left at the turn of the century, or, to use a more recent example, if social mobility undermined the class cleavage in the sixties, then the crucial questions are why the Liberal party in the first instance and the Conservative and Labour parties in the second did not adapt their behavior accordingly. The point is simply that parties do not always (perhaps never) act optimally, and understanding why they do not is central to any explanation of electoral volatility.

This may be especially important when studying political systems where the entry of new parties is restricted: to borrow from Hirschman's terminology, the value of voice within a party organization may be inversely related to the opportunity to exit (Hirschman, 1970). Rae has shown that broadly based movements of voter protest are less disadvantaged in a proportional representation

system then under the single member simple plurality rule used in Great Britain (Rae, 1967). This suggests that the openness of a party both in terms of its ability to incorporate new groups within the existing party structure and its capacity to adapt to change may be more crucial in party systems like the British where the option of a separate party is less attractive.

CHANGE AND COMPLEXITY IN THE ELECTORATE

The first place one might look to understand dealignment is within the electorate itself. As voters abandon their traditional loyalties, the logical question to ask is what changes in voter concerns and attitudes have caused this behavior. One plausible hypothesis is that volatility is a function of attitudinal complexity: that is, the probability of successful adaptation will diminish as the preferences of the electorate become intrinsically more difficult to satisfy. The difficulty of voter demands will in turn depend on the rate at which they change and the degree to which they cut across established party lines. I will consider first the one and then the other.

The fact that voter concerns and preferences change in itself places a demand upon the parties. Of course, not all attitudinal change requires party response since some attitude shifts are actually induced by the parties. For example, opinion on wage control in Great Britain seems to have followed the vacillations of party policy. In 1967, only 27 percent of Conservative supporters favored wage controls, but by 1974, 79 percent of them had come to support their party's pay policies. During the same period of time, Labour supporters went

from a 68 percent to a 48 percent approval, coinciding with the Labour party's opposition to Heath's income policy (Fish and Jackson, 19). Hence, it is important to distinguish autonomous from party led change. The demand for adaptation stems from the influence of factors other than party -- the state of the world economy, demographic changes, etc. -- on voter attitudes. Parties play a role in fixing the agenda and determining preferences, but their control is partial at best.

Shifting attitudes within the electorate increase the demands upon the parties in two senses. First, they heighten the degree of uncertainty among politicians about the true distribution of electoral preferences. One can imagine that it must have been very hard for the Asquithian Liberals to appreciate the extent to which attitudes had changed during the coalition years. A Liberal in 1918 might reasonably have believed that World War I caused a temporary abandonment of cherished Liberal principles like free trade and pacificism, and that a return to normal peacetime conditions would repopularize these ideas. Moreover, the uncertainty of the Asquithians must have been exacerbated by the final wave of enfranchisement which introduced a large set of voters with previously untested preferences. Richard Rose has shown that parties still make electoral decisions with imperfect information often because party regulars prefer to play their own hunches rather than accept the more systematic evidence of opinion surveys (Rose, 1974).

A second and related point is that shifts in the agenda or in public opinion will increase the risk to the parties associated with different policies. To take a stand on a new issue or to change

a position on an old issue involves some chance of a net loss in party support. As uncertainty about voter preferences increases, the payoffs associated with various alternative strategies becomes less clear. A changing electorate is therefore a riskier environment for the parties than a stable one. As I shall argue later, this makes the attitude of the politician towards risk an important variable in determination of how parties respond to electoral change.

Apart from the fact of change per se, the difficulty of electoral demands upon the parties depends on whether these changes lead to greater or less complexity in voter preferences. In particular, issues will be harder for parties and candidates to deal with as they cross-cut traditional party lines. It is important in this regard to see British parties as coalitions of political groups. The Liberal party in the nineteenth century, for example, was a coalition of free traders, nonconformists, pacifists, libertarians and radicals. The unity of groups within a party is maintained by either the consistency of their attitudes across a set of issues, or by the fact that issue disagreements occur over less important or unsalient issues. Typically, the consistency of issue opinions within the party is promoted by common ideological themes. However, numerous voting studies have shown that only a minority of voters possess well developed ideologies so that parties must often rely on differences in issue salience to prevent conflicts within their ranks. This tactic -- sometimes called an issue public strategy -- is perhaps more commonly associated with American parties, but there is good reason to think that British parties also cultivate particular

clientele within the electorate. When saliencies are uncorelated, the fact that opinions in the party are also inconsistent will matter less. Some supporters may not like the party's policy on X, or would not like it if they were aware of it, but the fact that they care more about some other issue Y may cause them to accept the party's position on X. Issues will cross-cut established party lines only if they are salient to supporters with divergent opinions.

Politics at the turn of the century provides an example of cross-cutting issues. Trevor Wilson, writing on the demise of the Liberal party, points out that World War I and its aftermath made salient a set of issues on which the Liberals were divided -- the peace settlement with Germany, fiscal policies, nationalization, etc. -- and made less salient traditional Liberal appeals (Wilson, 1966). These new issues divided Liberal supporters between radical elements willing to side with the working class, those who wanted to follow Lloyd George into coalition with the Conservatives and Asquithian Liberals who chose to ignore the new issues and stand by old themes. Thus, it was not simply a changing electorate which made the position of the Liberal party precarious, but the complexity of the divisions brought on by these changes.

CHANGE AND COMPLEXITY IN THE BRITISH ELECTORATE SINCE 1950

What kinds of changes in the preference and concerns of the electorate have occurred during the last 25 years in Britain. Table 1 shows the responses of a sample of the British public to the question "what is the most urgent problem facing the government

TABLE 1

URGENT PROBLEMS FACING GOVERNMENT

	May 1950	Apr 1951	May 1952	May 1953	Mar 1954	Jan 1955	Jan 1956	Jan 1957	Mar 1958	Jan 1959	Jan* 1960	Jan 1961	Jan 1962	Jan 1963	Jan 1964	Mar* 1966	Feb 1968	Apr 1970	Mar 1971	Jan 1972	Jan 1973	Jan 1974	Apr 1975
Economic	17	31	38	17	20	18	34	23	22	16	18	22	24	52	22	48	59	46	39	22	60	37	67
Foreign Policy	25	20	9	36	42	25	32	51	26	42	34	42	41	22	26	32	20	8	3	2	--	--	--
Social Service	--	--	3	--	13	9	3	--	--	--	11	10	6	6	8	13	5	10	5	2	4	1	--
Housing	20	--	7	9	3	6	5	5	23	6	9	7	7	6	14	16	5	10	2	4	6	2	3
Labor Relations	5	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	4	1	8	3	5	4	4	8	6	13	35	13	9	35	7
DK/Other	33	32	23	34	22	42	26	6	11	10	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	1	--
Food/Fuel	--	17	6	--	--	--	--	11	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	16	--
Employment	--	--	14	--	--	--	--	4	14	25	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	9	16	37	9	2	5
Educ., Hea., Rds.	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	12	10	5	5	13	8	7	6	2	2	2	--	--
Immigration	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	5	6	10	5	3	4	1	--
EEC	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	5	5	5	--	10
Ireland	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	7	--	--

*There is a slight change in wording for these years.

Data is taken from The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain 1937-1975, vols. 1 and 2. George H. Gallup (ed.)(New York: Random House, 1976).

today?" The data shows that among the changes that have taken place are a decline in importance of foreign affairs from their peak in the fifties and early sixties, and the rising salience of economic related problems -- prices, labor relations and unemployment. In every year since 1963, economic problems together have accounted for more than 50 percent of the responses. Certain welfare issues -- health education and housing -- remain important throughout this period, and several new issues emerged such as immigration, Ireland, the EEC and devolution (although it is revealing that by as late as 1975 devolution was not considered a salient problem).

What sorts of challenges to the parties did these changes present: did they lead to a more complex configuration within the electorate? Since the traditional alignment in Great Britain has been one based on class interest, issues should be more complex as they cut across the normal working class-middle class dimension. This suggests two testable hypotheses. One is that economic judgments cross-cut traditional class divisions and thereby contribute to voter volatility. Voters, it could be argued, judge economic policies "retrospectively," rewarding the government in times of prosperity and punishing it when conditions get worse, regardless of class or partisan affiliation. The alternative perspective of economic issues is that they are implicit, if not explicit, class issues: that is, since economic policies have different short term consequences for various sectors of the economy, individuals will use their vote to protect themselves from these consequences. Taking the second view, one would expect more working class individuals to favor the economic

policies of the Labour party over those of the Conservative party and vice versa for the middle class.

More formally, one can state the hypothesis in the following manner. If economic issues cross-cut the traditional party alignment, then the parameter relating class to economic assessment ought to be statistically no different from zero. At the same time, a voter's general partisan predisposition might bias his or her assessment of the government's economic performance and so must be held constant. Since any partisan self-image variable is likely to be simultaneously determined by the economic assessment variable, I have identified the equation by using the father's partisan identification as an instrument. Here too, economic assessments will present a more difficult challenge as the parameter relating partisan disposition to attitude is no different from zero. The test involves regressing the class and partisanship variables on the issue responses in order to examine whether the estimated parameters are statistically significant.

$$I = B_1 + B_2MC + B_3WC + B_4CONS + B_5LAB + B_6LIB + e$$

where: I is the issue response
MC is a dummy for middle class.
WC is a dummy for working class.
CONS is a dummy for Conservative partisan.
LAB is a dummy for Labour partisan.
LIB is a dummy for Liberal partisan.

Table 2 shows the results for variables measuring the voter's opinion of price and wage controls and assessments of the Conservative

TABLE 2

ECONOMIC ISSUES

A. Evaluation of Conservatives on Prices (1974)

Dependent Variable	MC	WC	CONS	LAB	LIB
Very Well	-.005	-.02*	.02*	-.01	.01
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Fairly Well	.047	-.10*	.13*	-.08*	.07*
	(.025)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.03)
Not Very Well	.004	.025	-.04	-.004	-.058
	(.027)	(.023)	(.026)	(.024)	(.037)
Not At All Well	.025	.105*	-.102*	.107*	-.049
	(.025)	(.021)	(.024)	(.023)	(.035)

B. Evaluation of Conservatives on Strikes (1974)

Dependent Variable	MC	WC	CONS	LAB	LIB
Very Well	-.01	-.08*	.089*	-.035*	.034
	(.02)	(.02)	(.019)	(.018)	(.027)
Fairly Well	.01	-.06*	.089*	-.04*	.016
	(.023)	(.01)	(.022)	(.02)	(.031)
Not Very Well	-.001	-.007	-.079*	.019	.005
	(.027)	(.023)	(.026)	(.024)	(.037)
Not At All Well	.017	.167*	-.073*	.090*	-.055
	(.025)	(.021)	(.024)	(.022)	(.034)

C. Wage Control (1974)

Dependent Variable	MC	WC	CONS	LAB	LIB
Stay Same	-.024	-.027	.048	.022	.048
	(.027)	(.023)	(.026)	(.024)	(.037)
Get Tougher	.021	-.040*	.074*	-.025	.078*
	(.023)	(.020)	(.022)	(.021)	(.032)
Ease Off	.018	.071*	-.071*	.058*	-.075*
	(.027)	(.023)	(.026)	(.024)	(.037)

*Significant at 95 percent level of confidence.

government's handling of prices and strikes. In all three cases, there are numerous statistically significant coefficients for class and partisanship and all have the anticipated signs. In general, it would appear that the middle class is less likely to interpret economic issues in terms of class interest than the working class. However, the Conservative party cue is very strong in economic assessments, particularly in the cases of strikes and wage control. Clearly, economic assessments are not unbiased retrospective judgments for a significant segment of the British population.

One might want to know further whether working class Conservatives assess party policies differently from working class Labourites or Liberals, or conversely, whether there are differences between middle class Liberals, Conservatives or Labourites. This involves a test of interactions between the various terms in the equation. This was done, but since it reaveled only a very few statistically significant parameters, the results are not displayed here. The only finding of interest was a weak tendency for middle class Liberals to be more favorable disposed toward Labour party economic policy and for middle class Liberals to be more favorably disposed toward Conservative party economic policy.

As a basis of comparison for the economic issues, it might be useful to examine the same independent variables regressed on some classic class issues like nationalization and taxation (see Table 3). Again, the class and partisanship variables have a significant effect on issue attitudes, and, as before, it seems that being middle class predicts class attitudes less well than being working class. In

TABLE 3

CLASS ISSUES

A. Nationalization (1974)

Dependent Variable	MC	WC	CONS	LIB	LAB
A Lot More	-.025 (.016)	.064* (.013)	-.042* (.015)	.018 (.014)	-.059* (.021)
A Few More	.009 (.020)	.071* (.017)	-.042* (.020)	.052* (.018)	.006 (.028)
No More	.031 (.028)	-.037 (.024)	.072* (.027)	-.008 (.025)	-.017 (.038)
Denatl. A Few	.046* (.023)	-.073* (.019)	.079* (.022)	-.028 (.020)	.086* (.032)

B. Taxes (1974)

Dependent Variable	MC	WC	CONS	LIB	LAB
Cons. V.M. Better	.041* (.019)	-.057* (.016)	.103* (.018)	-.025 (.017)	.001 (.026)
Cons. S.W. Better	.045* (.022)	-.06* (.019)	.098* (.021)	-.036 (.020)	.092* (.030)
Lib. S.W. Better	-.008 (.021)	.094* (.018)	-.044* (.020)	.092* (.019)	-.016 (.029)
Lab. V.M. Better	-.008 (.014)	.059* (.012)	-.015 (.013)	.027* (.012)	-.004 (.019)

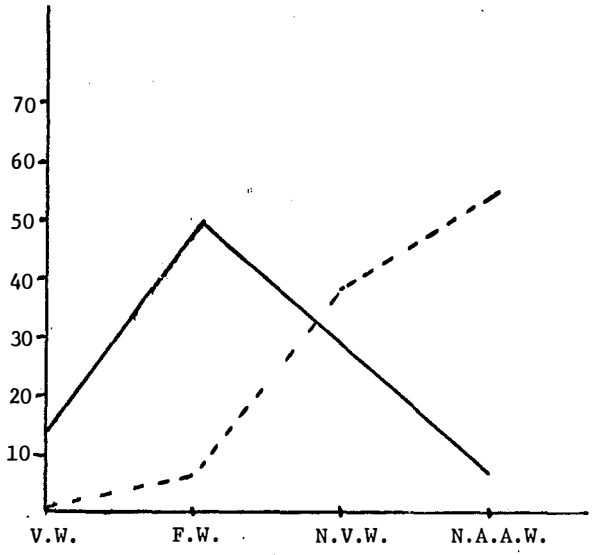
V.M. -- Very Much.

S.W. -- Somewhat.

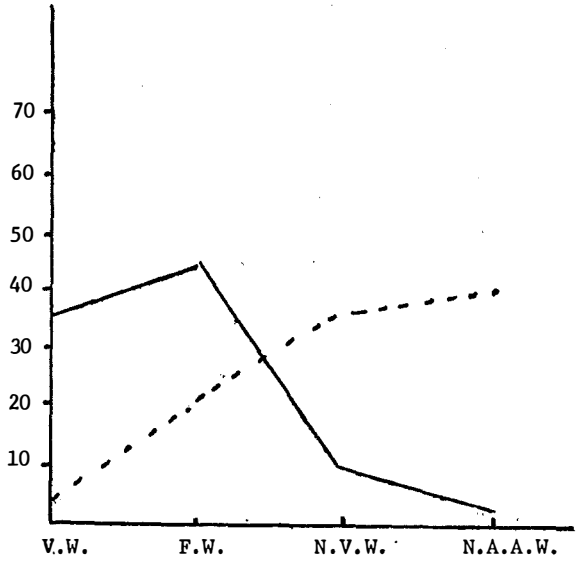
among party identifiers on each of the issues. In every instance except devolution, we observe only the opinions of those who consider the issue highly salient since, by the reasoning of the previous argument, nonsalient issues pose less of a challenge to the parties. As Table 5 shows, opinions among both the Conservative and Labour identifiers on both class and economic issues are single peaked and clearly distinguishable from the dominant opinion in the other party. By contrast, opinion on devolution is both more divided within a given party and less distinguishable from the opinions of supporters of the other party. The same would seem to hold true for attitudes on immigration, especially for Labour partisans. Opinions on the EEC are more distinguishable by parties than for devolution and immigration, but in the Conservative case attitudes are not single peaked due to a split between Powellite anti-marketeers and the leadership pro-market position. The conclusion one can draw from this exercise is that opinions within the major parties are more divided on cross-cutting issues.

In general then, the most interesting and, one suspects, difficult electoral challenge for the parties comes from issues like devolution, immigration and to a lesser extent the EEC, since they appear to cross-cut in varying degrees traditional appeals and labels. Economic assessments on the other hand seem to be strongly influenced by both class interests and general partisanship. How the parties dealt with both the economic and cross-cutting issues will be considered next.

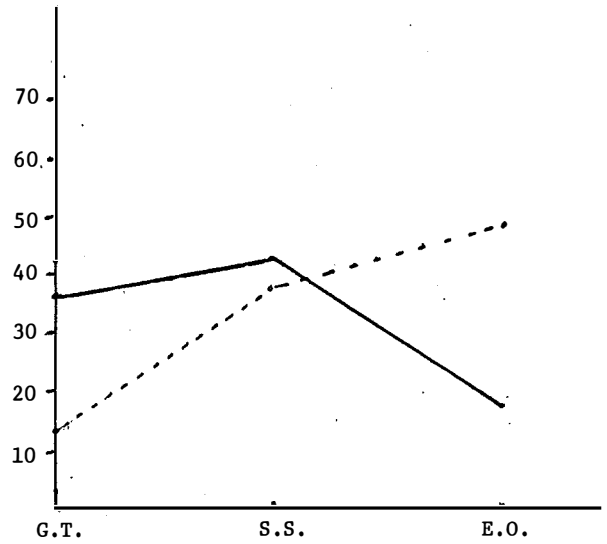
PRICES (1974)



STRIKES (1974)



WAGE CONTROL (1974)



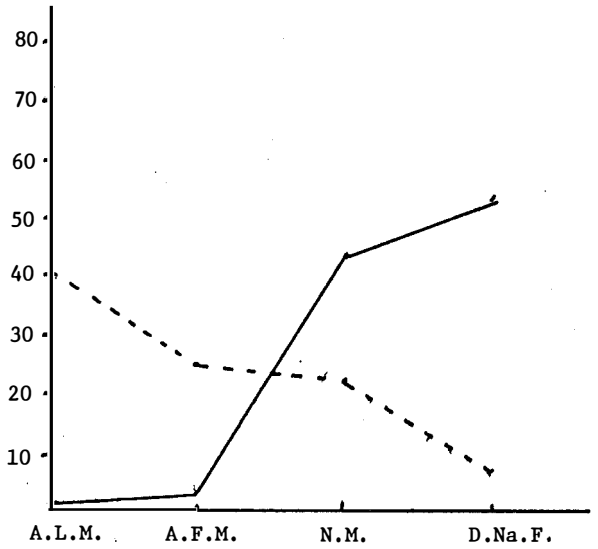
——————— Conservative.

- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - Labour.

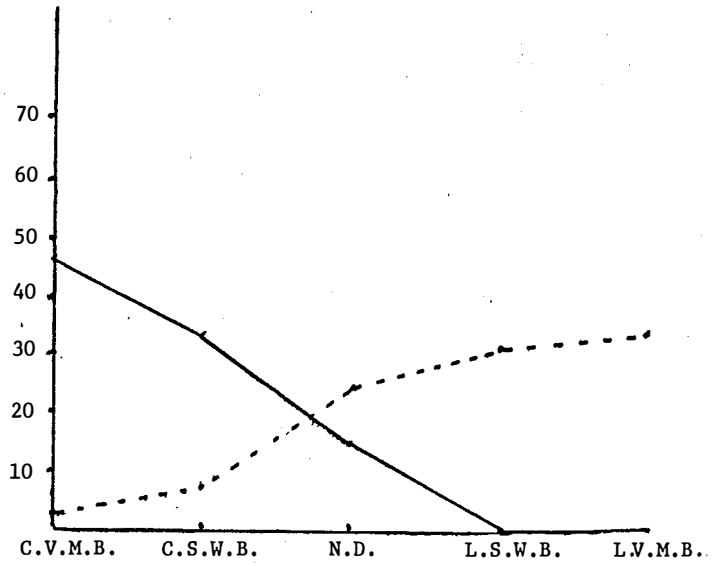
N.W. -- Not Well.
F.W. -- Fairly Well.
N.V.W. -- Not Very Well.
N.A.A.W. -- Not At All Well.

G.T. -- Get Tougher.
S.S. -- Stay Same.
E.O. -- Ease Off.

NATIONALIZATION (1974)



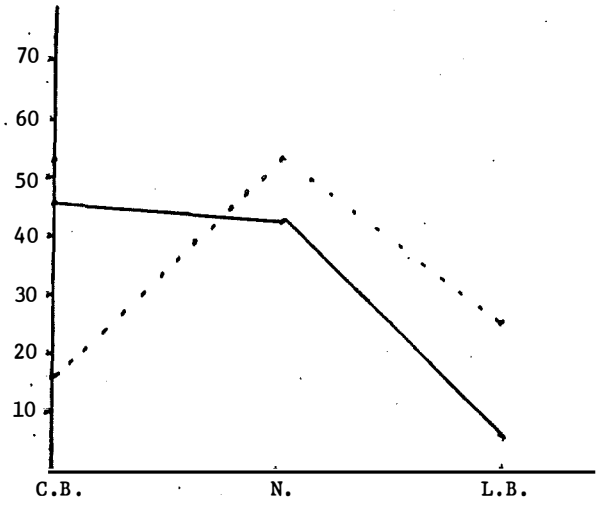
TAXES (1974)



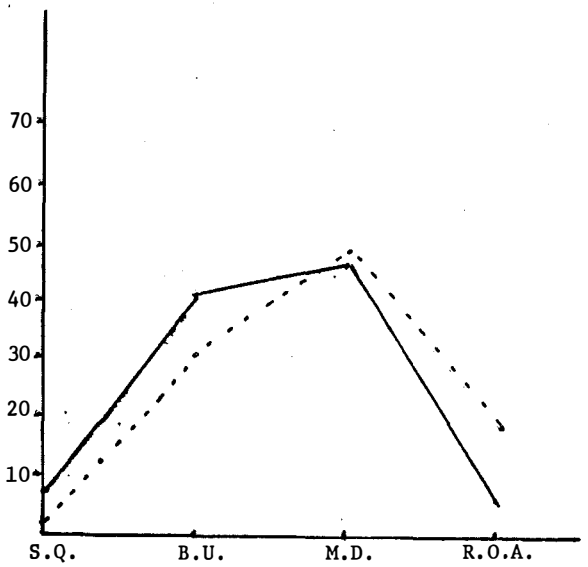
A.L.M. -- A Lot More.
A.F.M. -- A Few More.
N.M. -- No More.
D.Na.F.-- Denationalize a Few.

C.V.M.B. -- Conservative Very Much Better.
C.S.W.B. -- Conservative Somewhat Better.
N.D. -- No Difference.
L.S.W.B. -- Labor Somewhat Better.
L.V.M.B. -- Labor Very Much Better.

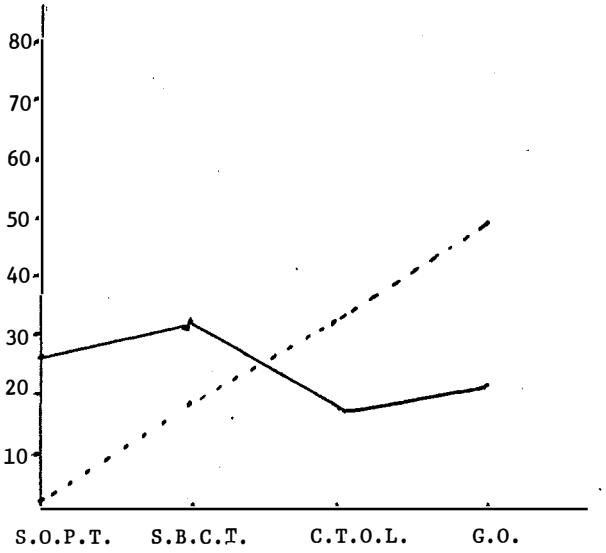
IMMIGRATION (1966)



DEVOLUTION (1974)



EEC (1974)



C.B. -- Conservative Better.
N. -- Neither.
L.B. -- Labour Better.
S.Q. -- Status Quo.
B.U. -- Better Understood.
M.D. -- More Decisions.
R.O.A. -- Run Own Affairs.
S.O.P.T. -- Stay On Present Terms.
S.B.C.T. -- Stay But Change Terms.
C.T.O.L. -- Change Terms Or Leave.
G.O. -- Get Out.

THE PARTY RESPONSE

While there is evidence of change in the concerns and preferences of the electorate, a full examination of electoral volatility must take into account as well the response of the parties to these changes. To return to the example of the Liberal party at the turn of the century, it is possible to identify ways in which the party contributed to its own demise: viz., the unwillingness to give more representation to the working class, the split in its leadership, and financial problems. A similar question -- how did the parties contribute to their own demise -- can be asked of the recent dealignment.

To say that a party contributed to its own demise implies some standard of optimal behavior. There now exists in political science a large body of theoretical work on optimal party strategies. The general idea behind them is that if parties act to maximize votes, they will search for positions on issues which will assure at least a tie, given particular distribution of preferences in the electorate. This conception of political competition is analogous to economic models of business firms trying to maximize profits. However, just as the competitive behavior of self-interested firms may generate negative externalities, it is conceivable that volatility is a political externality generated by self-interested vote maximizing party behavior. Thus, the first of two party related hypotheses will be that volatility is partly a consequence of strategies which are rational by the standard of Downsian vote maximization, but which ultimately contribute to a growing dissatisfaction with the parties.

The Response to Economic Issues

This point can be seen clearly in the response of the parties to economic concerns. As it was argued earlier, economic issues often involve hard choices about present conditions in order to achieve long range goals like prosperity and growth. Decisions to expand the economy or deflate, to cut the budget or provide more social services, or to nationalize or allow old industries to die, not only have specific economic consequences, but they also have political consequences. The vote maximizing party must, therefore, choose its policies in office under important electoral constraints. While there are numerous examples of how electoral considerations constrain economic choices, I will mention just a few.

(1) Manipulating the Business Cycle to Conform to Election Dates: Whatever class differences exist in the electorate towards specific economic policies, the party in power is always better off in times of expansion and growth. The suggestion that parties use economic cycles to their electoral advantage is by no means novel. Butler and Kavanaugh in their study of the October election say the following:

> October 1974 saw, once again, an election in which the incumbent government had manipulated the economy for its own short term political advantage. It is no accident that in every election for twenty years, apart from the unpremeditated one of February 1974, real wages have advanced faster than prices over the months before polling days.

While the logic of such manipulations is unassailable from the standpoint of vote maximization, the externalities generated by such behavior are an aggravation of the persistant stop-go cycles of the British economy and an increasing cynicism about the motives and intentions of politicians.

(2) Avoiding Unpopular Economic Measures: Both the Labour government under Wilson in 1964-1970 and the Heath government of 1970-1974 entered office with long range plans to achieve export led economic growth. In each case, the government discovered that it had to make potentially unpopular decisions about taxation, unemployment, prices and wages. Apart from the tendency to time unpopular measures to follow rather than precede elections, the parties found that policies with harsh short term consequences often had to be abandoned entirely. Unemployment policy is a classic case in point. The electoral consequences of unemployment above a commonly recognized level (2 percent in the sixties) strongly influenced economic choices in Great Britain, often at the expense of intended structural reforms of the economy. Labour's regional development schemes in the sixties, for example, subsidized employment in decaying industries in areas like the Clydeside, but at the expense of not encouraging workers to move into competitive industries. The renewed interest of the Labour left in nationalization was largely motivated by the desire to prevent further redundancies. Even the Heath government, which was initially very hostile to propping up lame duck industries, had to accept the subsidization of Rolls-Royce for fear among other things of the unemployment that would result. The economic value of unemployment

is a matter beyond the competence and scope of this discussion, but the important points are that other alternatives were foreclosed very early from the agenda largely for electoral reasons, and that arguably at least, both the Conservative and Labour governments were led to implement policies which conflicted with their long range goal to make British industry competitive.

(3) Protecting the Economic Interests of Party Clients: Evidence presented earlier indicated that assessments of the government's economic policies are frequently biased by one's class and partisan affiliation. The fact that economic issues can be interpreted from the perspective of class interests means that the parties can use these issues to their electoral advantage. An important consideration for both the Labour and Conservative parties is the need to protect the base or core of their support. Anthony King has argued that this was a major reason behind Labour's swing to the left during 1970-1974 (Penniman et al, 1974). One way to maintain the core of support is to design economic policies which decide the hard choices in favor of one's clients. Thus, the Labour government in 1964 and again in 1974 attempted to buy the cooperation of the unions with generous social service allowances, pensions, and food subsidy increases. Similarly, the Conservatives in October 1974 tried to win back the middle class vote with their mortgage proposals. More generally, the dispute between SET versus VAT, wage versus price control, statutory wage restraints versus

voluntary bargains, or higher gifts and income taxes versus greater investment allowances, can be traced to differences in ideology and the material interests of core clientele. Policies which aim to please the core are very popular with the activists. It is not surprising, therefore, that many agents reported high enthusiasm within the party organizations during the February election (Butler and Kovanaugh, 1974: Penniman et al, 1975). On the other hand, there are two externalities which can be attributed to policies aimed at the core. First, policies which please the faithful may conflict with long range plans. Labour's taxation policies provided the funds it needed to carry through its welfare plans, but hampered its long range goal to stimulate investment and win the confidence of the business community. Secondly, the appeal to class interest on economic policies may have some feedback effect on relations between the unions and management generally. A political party's short term electoral interest may be satisfied by distinctively differentiating its economic policies from those of the other party on class interest terms, but if parties do affect opinions within the electorate, one cost of this strategy may be that it contributes to the general prisoner's dilema of mistrust which characterizes industrial relations in Great Britain. Finally, policies which appease the faithful may reinforce the image that parties are responsive to sectional interests primarily.

The Response to Cross-Cutting Issues

Cross-cutting issues, it has been argued, are intrinsically

more difficult to deal with, but here again one can ask whether the parties' response to these issues generated political externalities. Since these issues are potentially divisive, it may be true that no position on a cross-cutting issue would resolve the question satisfactorily. Therefore, the response of the parties has typically been to exclude the issue from the agenda, to stifle distinctive choice or to downplay the importance of the issue. Immigration in the sixties provides a good illustration of such behavior by the parties. Strict regulation of immigration was very popular among the working class yet the parties were unable to exploit the issue to electoral advantage. The Labour party was divided between its socialist principles and racialist working class sentiment, and the Conservative party was split between a pro-Empire faction who believed that Britain should honor its colonial obligations and Powellites. The result was a tacit collusion on the part of both parties to downplay the issue. However noble this might have been from a civil rights standpoint, it meant that an important issue would have been excluded from public debate had Enoch Powell not taken up the cause. Doug Schoen concludes the feeling that major parties were unresponsive to the common man's needs was a major factor in the success of Powellism (Schoen, 1977). The more recent problems of dealing with devolution provide another example of the difficulty of turning cross-cutting issues into electoral advantage. For this reason, both parties failed to take the devolution seriously until after the startling gains of the SNP in the 1974 elections despite signs of nationalist unrest in the late sixties and early seventies. To return to the more general point, the incentives of self-interested

behavior lead the parties to delay and waffle on cross-cutting issues, but the externality generated by this behavior is that important issues do not get properly represented on the public agenda.

The Effect of Organizational Demands on Party Strategy

The hypothesis that volatility is partly an externality caused by rational vote maximizing behavior seems to have some credibility, but a second hypothesis which deserves equal examination is that volatility is a consequence of behavior generated by organizational demands. The swing of the parties to militancy in 1974, clientelistic economic policies and the tendency to avoid potentially divisive issues can be attributed to the need to preserve traditional bases of support within the electorate. Reinforcing these tendencies is the consideration that parties are organizations with internal incentives and goals. The institutionalization of cooperation between groups within a party framework means that certain power relations, behaviors and norms become set and, therefore, harder to change. Moreover, the bureaucratization of the party makes it less receptive to new groups and ideas, and less likely to give up practices which have succeeded in the past. Appeasing the militants, pursuing clientelistic economic policies and avoiding divisive issues may thus serve a secondary goal apart from maximizing electoral support of appeasing demands from within the organization itself.

More specifically, there are three features of British politics which bear directly on the problem of adaptability: the openness of the party to new men and ideas, the degree to which

vested interests are fixed and the bureaucratization of the party.

(1) The Openness of the Party to New Men and Ideas: As new issues, or new ways of looking at old issues, become more popular, adaptability requires either that the politicians in office alter their positions accordingly or that new men who change with the times rise within party ranks to displace them. Some politicians of course have shown remarkable flexibility during their careers, but uncertainty, risk aversity and even ideological stubborness sometimes cause politicians to hold tenaciously to old appeals. This makes replacement within the party all the more important. Thus, the crucial question is how easy is entry into the party for new candidates. Austin Ranney has argued that the British parties are far more closed in this regard than the American parties (Ranney, 1975). Where aspiring congressional candidates in the U.S. must compete in a primary, the British MP is selected by small groups of party members with the approval of central party headquarters. Moreover, since candidates do not have to run in their home constituencies, the parties can manipulate the assignments such that senior members of the party run in safe districts while new candidates run in hopeless or marginal seats. The significance of this is that the outcome of the election will not affect the career of party leaders, permitting the luxury of concern for principles or the unity of the party. Once elected, the control of the Prime Minister and the cabinet over advancement contributes to the socialization of new MP's. Those who attempt to take up causes not officially endorsed by the party -- for example,

Enoch Powell's stand on immigration -- find themselves excluded from positions of power and in some cases have difficulty getting readopted. In short, entry into the party is comparatively restricted, and once admitted, there are many incentives for the MP to toe the party line. Other institutional factors -- the low salience of the local MP, the restricted power of the parliamentary committees, and the discipline of the parties -- make it very difficult for those with radically different viewpoints to find autonomous bases of power from which to challenge the party.

(2) The Role of Vested Interests: As parties institutionalize, the groups which originally constituted them establish certain privileges and powers. By the formal incorporation of these powers into the party's constitution or by custom, these groups can retain a power disproportionate to their representativeness in the population generally. The role of trade unions in the Labour party, and to a lesser extent, that of business in the Conservative party, exemplifies this well. The sponsorship of candidates in safe seats, the inclusion of trade union and business groups on policy committees, and formal representation on the party executive gives sectional groups important leverage within the two major British parties. Hence, the parties not only cultivate clients within the electorate generally, but clients tend to have a disproportionate power within the party itself. Appeasing clients by modifying policy, dispensing budget giveaways, or giving them representation on the cabinet serves the dual purpose of activating the faithful in the electorate and preventing organizational disquiet.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of British voters believe that big business and the trade unions exert too much influence in politics. The key question may be whether parties which institutionalize group privileges can hope to adapt to changing electoral demands.

(3) The Bureaucratization of the Party: The growing literature on bureaucracies has demonstrated the difficulty of changing the behavior of organizations as they grow and become more complex. Organizations tend to develop fixed ways of approaching problems (sometimes called standard operating procedures) and to be averse to adopting new procedures with uncertain payoffs. The bureaucratic mentality is one which avoids unnecessary risk. The growth of central party staff, party agents and paid activists has created significant bureaucracies in both parties. While there is not a great deal of data on this point, there is some evidence that agents and clients have their SOP's which make adaptation by the party more difficult. Consider, for example, the practice of canvassing. It involves locating the faithful, ignoring the potential voters of the opponents (for fear they will be negatively motivated to vote) and then knocking up your followers on election day. Contacting the faithful and drawing them out to the polls on old themes is a safe way of assuring a result similar to those in the past, but it gives the party agent little feel for the attitudes of the nonfaithful, and makes the agent reluctant to use new issues or appeals which might divide the faithful. Coupled with this narrow

strategy is a reluctance to rely on modern sampling techniques -- after all, the agents do not need the polls to communicate the demands of the faithful to them. However, this means that agents and activists will be even more uncertain than before of changes in public opinion. This narrowness of bureaucratic strategy helps explain the undue optimism of the agents and party workers during the February election. They had the ideal platforms from which to speak to the loyalists, and not surprisingly, they probably found considerable enthusiasm during their contacts with the population. At the same time, the restrictiveness of their contacts probably prevented them from anticipating the eventual result of this strategy in 1974.

CONCLUSION

The sixties and seventies brought changes in the agenda of British politics and the preferences of the electorate, particularly in the form of increasingly salient economic problems and the emergence of several cross-cutting issues like immigration and devolution. To some extent these circumstances are to be blamed for the dealignment of support from the major parties during this period. Nonetheless, one can also argue that the response of the parties to these problems contributed to their current predicament, both in the sense that self-interested vote maximization contributed to voter alienation, and that the institutionalization of support made adaptation and change more difficult.

Does this mean that continued dealignment or even realignment is inevitable in the future? Not necessarily, since much depends on

what problems the parties will have to face in the future and to what extent the parties can overcome institutionalized inertia. The advantage that the Conservative and Labour parties have is that the electoral system makes entry by certain kinds of minor parties into parliament more difficult. This means that for many changes in the electorate, the parties can afford to wait for the agency of voice within the party to initiate the process of adaptation. Issues like immigration or devolution -- because the electoral system tends to reward concentrated support or because the issues are irrelevant to the traditional party division -- are more difficult for the parties to deal with. For these reasons, a realignment, if it were to occur, would be more likely along racial or nationalist lines than on the basis of economic or general disatisfaction.

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